

# Contrasting Futures

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All of us who work on sustainability think about the future. The sustainability movement has a vision of a future sustainable world in which...well, what? In this month's STB, let's take a look at competing visions from two among our most important thinkers – Richard Heinberg and David Korten. They are not exactly comparable since – as you will see – they

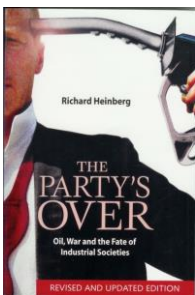


exhibit somewhat different emphases. We'll also note a few other interesting and valuable writings about what the future might bring. In a future paper we will look more closely at some formal scientific theories of collapse and energy descent.

**The Ultimate Pessimist?** In his book *Peak Everything: Waking Up to the Century of Declines*, peak oil theorist Richard Heinberg offers up chapter 10 as "[A letter from the Future](#)," (pages 173 – 184). Written back to us somehow in 2107 (the book came out in 2007), Heinberg looks back on the one hundred years of his life, yearning to tell someone – that is, you, dear reader – of how we wrecked the planet and ruined the lives of future generations. During the great fossil fuel “party” from the 1850s to sometime around 2010 we forgot that “Energy has been the central organizing – or should I say *disorganizing*? – principle of this century.” First, came a series of recessions followed by “an endless depression.” Economists, thinking in terms of market models, neglected the fact that nothing at any price was actually capable of replacing fossil fuels civilization had come to rely on. He goes through all the technological fixes but nixes them all. Photovoltaic panels required rare metals like [gallium](#) and [indium](#) that became depleted. Nuclear reactors ran out of uranium surprisingly quickly. (In his earlier book *The Party's Over: Oil, War and the Fate of Industrial Societies*, page 163, he cites reports that the US has only a 40-year supply of uranium within its borders). On top of our misplaced faith in technology, early and mid-21<sup>st</sup> Century people allowed the global economy to be run like a casino. Among those



making fantastic fortunes, “none...were actually doing anything useful...Eventually stores were empty, people were out of work, many of the goods people had were things like cars and electronic gadgets that “nobody could afford to operate anymore.”

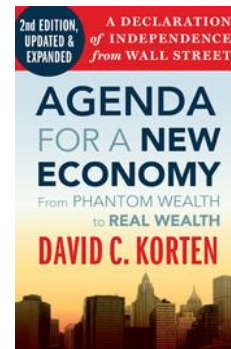
Before this eventuality people in the U.S. were led by angry politicians to start a series of wars to capture the energy sources of others. Millions died. The rightwing demonized poor people overseas. The left continued to mindlessly criticize corporations, failing to see that redistribution was of little value by then.

Then climate change began to interfere with food production. Fresh water became scarce. For some it was the great “Die-off.” For those like the letter writer, a modest house and some hand tools made life possible. A few survived in “makeshift rural communes,” while in the cities people tore up the concrete and and grew what food they could.

Heinberg nears the end his letter from the future with a question: **“Can you change my past, which is your future?”**

To read Heinberg’s Letter from the Future, click [here](#).

**Life in a Real-Wealth Economy:** [David Korten](#). Many readers will be familiar with David Korten, former Harvard Business School Prof., Chair of the Board of YES! Magazine and author of *When Corporations Rule the World* and *The Great Turning: The Post-Corporate World*. The first edition of his *Agenda for a New Economy* came out three days after President Obama’s inauguration. Most of the book is an attack on Wall Street and the way financial markets in the US are managed. On pages 274 to 283 of the second edition he offers an [email from his brief visit to 2084](#). [In the first edition, a shorter version appears on pages 150 to 155.]



Korten looks backward from 2084 to see that “people in communities all over the world rallied to the cause and created a new economy from the bottom up.” The world ended up being a middle-class society, with “modest distinctions between the richest and the poorest in terms of income, asset ownership, size of residence, and consumption.” In this new society employment and time for family, friends and spiritual development are better distributed; wealth and well-being are measured by health and businesses are locally owned. Suburban sprawl was eliminated as the price of oil made suburban life irrational. Many suburban buildings (and parking lots? RWF) were torn up so the land could be planted in local gardens. Agrochemicals were banned; recycling and composting became the norm.

The big corporations were broken up and sold to their workers or went bankrupt. Gambling, financial speculation and collecting rents are unfamiliar to people in 2084.

Crime, war, terrorism and wasteful military spending are relegated to the history books. Most energy comes from wind or direct solar. Cars are rare and most travel is by public transit. Global electronics connects people even more than today. Databases offer everyone equal access.

People take joy in contributing to the care of the environment: “Everywhere I go there seems to be some sort of neighborhood party, potluck, or cultural event.” (p. 278) “Suicide, divorce, abortion, and teenage pregnancy are so rare that when they do occur, they are news events and spark lively discussions among people curious to learn what went wrong and how it might be avoided in the future.” (p. 279)

Economics as an academic discipline has become a subdiscipline of ecology. All jobs pay “a family wage,” adequate to keep families away from borrowing. Many households have savings accounts on which 2–3% interest accumulates. This money remains in the local community, preventing the concentration of money in the hands of large banking conglomerates.

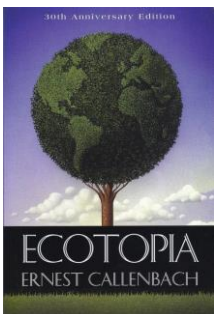
Just before introducing his vision, Korten acknowledges “the immensity of the barriers against change” (page 274). At the end he writes [page 283]: “My greatest source of motivation is the knowledge that it is within our collective means to unleash the positive creative potential of the human consciousness and make that [2084] vision a reality.”

To read Korten’s email from 2084, click [here](#).

Note: Korten’s much expanded second edition of the book includes its own discussion guide that you can download free [here](#).

**Ecotopia.** In 1975 Banyan Tree Books in Berkeley, California, published [\*Ecotopia: The Notebooks and Reports of William Weston\*](#). This slim science fiction volume of 167 pages has now sold over a million copies in nine languages. More recent editions advertise it as “The first dramatic portrait of an ecologically sustainable society!” The author is [Ernest Callenbach](#).

*Ecotopia* is organized around the fictional news dispatches and the personal diary entries of fictional correspondent William Weston who travels to the new nation of Ecotopia in 1999. In 1979 Northern California, Oregon and Washington had seceded from the U.S. and created an environmentally based new order. (How they managed to break away and stay separate is explained in the book but I will leave it to you to find that out.) As the first ever regular U.S. reporter to visit Ecotopia, Weston describes the new society they have built – and, falls in love with a sexy and open-minded Ecotopian beauty. There is a lot for all kinds of readers in this book.



Correspondent Weston finds a decentralized, eco-friendly non-up-tight culture with no cars, lots of high speed trains, local small-scale hospitals carrying out cradle-to-grave health insurance with less high- tech equipment and more preventive practices. People live in groups of five to twenty, workers own the main productive institutions and education focuses on systems thinking. Homes are built of wood or of corn-based plastic tubing and all are centered around rail stations. Refrigerators run on household septic tank methane. Ecotopian scientists are on the verge of developing plants that use photosynthesis to generate electricity. Microwaves are illegal: you eat fresh food. People use the metric system and recycling containers are found everywhere (remember that this book was written in 1975 when hardly anyone recycled anything in the U.S.).

Taxes are levied only on enterprises; train cars are filled with hanging ferns and small plants. Streets are quiet (no cars, remember?) with only occasional electric taxis – even in the nation’s capital of San Francisco. The general work week is 20 hours. To build a house of wood you first have to work for a few months in a forest labor camp planting trees to replace the wood your house might use. However,

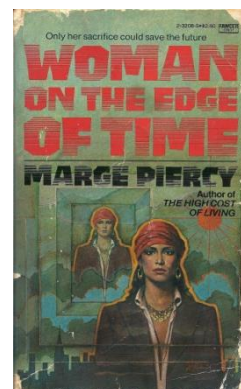
They cut trees and trim them with a strange, almost religious respect: showing the emotional intensity and care we might use in preparing a ballet” (page 56).

Chemical fertilizers had been entirely replaced by composted food waste and sewage. The GNP of Ecotopia is very low:

“...mankind, the Ecotopians assumed, was not meant for production....Instead, humans were meant to take their modest place in a seamless, stable-state web of living organisms” (page 43).

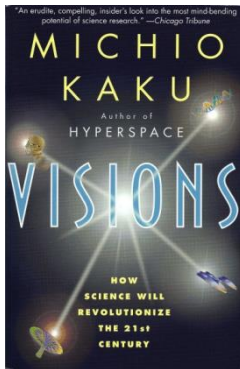
Does this sound like the manifesto of the sustainability movement today? What would you add? You can read details of Ecotopia’s education system, arts and sports, their military defense and international relations policies, and other features. Could such a society succeed? Callenbach thinks so.

[Woman on the Edge of Time](#). In 1976 novelist and poet [Marge Piercy](#) came out with an astonishing science fiction tale about Consuela (Connie) Ramos, a Mexican-American house cleaner turned mental patient who becomes the subject of a bizarre “neuro-electric experiment.” Through a series of unexpected events, Connie is transported into a future which lands her in Mattapoissett, [an actual town in Massachusetts today]. Mattapoissett could be a settlement in Ecotopia, but Piercy’s story builds to a dramatic crescendo far different from the general descriptions in Callenbach’s book. Here is one of Connie’s visions that sounds much like Ecotopia:



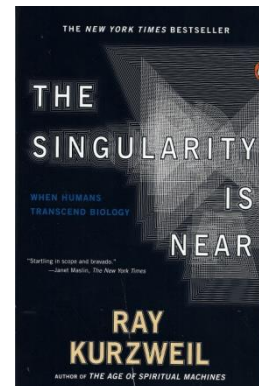
“...she would study how to fix the looted landscape, heal rivers choked with filth. Doctor the soil squandered for a quick profit on cash crops. Then she would be useful. She would like herself, as she had during the brief period she had been involved in the war-on-poverty hoax. People would respect her. There’s Consuelo, they’d say, doctor of soil, protector of rivers. Her children would be proud of her. Her lovers would not turn from her, would not die in prison, would not be cut down in the streets like Martin” (page 214).

Note how Piercy brings feminism and racial oppression alongside environmental destruction into the story through Connie’s dream. I found a fascinating brief overview of the book by University of Hawaii professor [Miriam Rosenthal](#). Click on her name and take a look – or better – read Piercy’s exciting and engrossing novel, then look at the questions Rosenthal suggests the reader might be left with. By the way, I should mention that Connie actually travels in time to two different futures. The other you will recognize if you imagine the Nazis had won the second world war.



**Visions and The Singularity.** For future buffs I would like to mention two other interesting books. Perhaps folks would like to talk about these next two books in greater detail in a future blog? In 1997 physicist and progressive science popularize [Michio Kaku](#) reported on the results of interviews with 150 top scientists over a ten-year period. He weaves together predictions about the future developments in computers, about molecular biology and its role in overcoming cancer and a host of

genetic diseases, about likely trends in employment and about how quantum physics will change many aspects of life on earth: nanotechnology, molecular machines, deuterium (hydrogen) fusion machines, anti-matter engines and more. (In March 2011 he will have out a new book called [Physics of the Future: How Science Will Change Daily Life by 2100.](#)) One interesting feature



of Michio Kaku’s books is that he acknowledges the social and political forces that interact with scientific knowledge. And then there is [Ray Kurzweil](#)’s audacious predictions in [The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology](#). This book, published in 2005, is supposedly to be made into a movie to be released in 2010. First will come “nanobots,” microrobots that can be injected into the bloodstream or the brain to accelerate our thinking ability or cure diseases. As computer science eventually succeeds in reverse engineering the human brain, Kurzweil, an important inventor of computer software and now a futurist, identifies 2045 as the year in which artificial intelligence (AI) will surpass human intelligence in all ways. Because AI operates at speeds billions of times faster than human intelligence, machines will become a new form of life that will coexist with humans while taking control of scientific development. Then some really strange things happen. You can click on the links above to read a detailed summary of Kurzweil’s predictions on Wikipedia.

**Read it yourself – click on highlighted text below for:**

[Richard Heinberg's Letter from the 2107.](#)

[David Korten's Email from 2084](#)

## **Some Discussion Questions**

1. Does Heinberg's description of the key failures of the Right and the Left sound plausible to you? Do you see too much criticism of corporations on the Left and not enough of an alternative program? If so, what alternative programs do we need to create or expand?
2. Does Korten's happy future seem to be a realistic picture? Forgetting for the moment the problem of how people got there, does the overall structure of the society seem to hold together logically? For example, could he explain how advanced medical research takes place within the framework he presents?
3. Can you think of some events and/or existing institutions that seem to fit into Heinberg's predictions? Korten's? Callenbach's? For example, does Alternatives Federal Credit Union seem to be the kind of bank Korten has in mind?